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No fast fix to ease traffic near Joint Base Lewis-McChord

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Lines of slow-moving vehicles already create headaches around Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Add thousands of returning soldiers and their families, and those traffic headaches could become migraines.

Soldiers eating breakfast at the Lakewood Denny's last week said bad traffic keeps them from leaving base as often as they might otherwise. When they do, they mostly stick around Lakewood, Steilacoom and DuPont.

Traffic engineers and government officials are reluctant to promise quick fixes.

"There's not much we can do in the short term," said Bill McDonald, DuPont's city manager.

That's why local governments, led by Lakewood, are studying long-term solutions. On Monday, the Lakewood City Council got its first look at findings that call for, among other improvements, widening Interstate 5 and improving or replacing interchanges next to the base's busiest gates.

"We basically need to widen I-5 and extend ramps so they can handle all the cars," said Steve Bennett, traffic operations engineer for the state Department of Transportation. "All that requires money."

The study identifies \$1 billion worth of improvements.

Officials say they haven't even begun to look at funding options. Instead, they've taken the first step in a long process to unclog traffic on a 10-mile stretch of I-5 between state Route 512 and Thurston County.

The study was funded with a \$450,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Defense and \$50,000 from the state.

Over the past 11/2 years, the agencies have counted cars and run computer models. Between 126,000 and 152,000 vehicles pass through Lewis-McChord's gates every day, according to the findings.

Three of the four freeway interchanges that are the base's primary access points were found to be structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The result is many side- and rear-end collisions.

Dan Penrose, a Lakewood project manager, said the study found that 80 percent of drivers who move through Lewis-McChord gates also travel on I-5.

"It's a bottleneck," he said. "You could solve some of these issues with a (interchange) superstructure, but you'd still have the main line on Interstate 5."

For several years, much of the energy to fix traffic in the area has focused on a proposed route that would cut through Lewis-McChord.

Pierce County has led the effort to build the proposed \$318 million, six-mile cross-base highway between I-5 and state Route 7. The first phase, which connects SR 7 with Spanaway Loop Road, was completed last year.

But the bulk of the project remains unfunded. Local legislators were thwarted trying to get \$1.5 million in last year's state transportation budget.

Lewis-McChord officials say they've taken steps to help with traffic flow on the base as soldiers return home this year. The base plans \$10 million worth of improvements in 2010.

Steve Perrenot, the base's public works director, said the work includes adding right-turn lanes, synchronizing traffic signals, adding a roundabout and repaving some roads on or near the base so they have wider shoulders.

Lewis-McChord also plans to begin design of a connector road between the Army and Air Force sides of the base, which merged this year. The project, which could cost around \$30 million and isn't funded, would help improve traffic behind the gates and keep cars off I-5, he said.

McDonald, the DuPont city manager, doesn't foresee a huge problem for the region, even with nearly 15,000 soldiers yet to return from deployments this year.

Roger Schoessel, engineer for the City of Lacey, noted that all these soldiers and their families were here in 2009.

"We've accommodated them once," he said. "We can accommodate them again."

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WHAT SHOULD BE FIXED

Potential improvements identified in Interstate 5 traffic study:

- Build new interchanges at DuPont-Steilacoom Road (Exit 119), 41st Division Drive (Exit 120), Berkeley Street (Exit 122) and Thorne Lane (Exit 123).
- Add north- and southbound lanes from Mounts Road to Thorne Lane.
- Add a southbound auxiliary lane between Berkeley and Thorne interchanges; build braided northbound ramps headed north.
- Add a northbound lane between Thorne and Gravelly Lake.



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